

Advent 3-C  
December 16, 2018  
St. John's Cathedral

This week is when we observe Gaudete Sunday – and the reason for the rose-colored vestments. Gaudete means ‘rejoice’ and it is a word we hear in our readings.

But I also think we might have heard a ‘lectionary mood swing’ in our readings today. First comes rejoicing in the passage from Zephaniah: “Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; Shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart.”

Then from Philippians: “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

So far, so good. Then, enter John the Baptist speaking to those who have gathered at the Jordan river for a baptism of repentance:

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

Oops. It sounds like we’ve fallen off the rejoicing train, even on this Sunday when the emphasis is about rejoicing. John the Baptist, whose mission it was to announce the coming of Jesus does not mince words here. Listen up, he seems to be saying.

We need to remember here that John is speaking to the crowd of people who came to him to repent and to be baptized. These were people with deep longings. People who lived in a region with an occupying Roman army and a lousy economy. They longed, as do most people, for peace and prosperity.

But we have to suppose that they also had deep longings – heartfelt longings – for God. That’s why they were there. They were hoping for a Messiah – one who would come from God

to be God's savior on earth. The anointed one who would in some way set them free and inaugurate God's rule.

These are the people John the Baptist seems to be barking at. He calls them a bunch of snakes, a pile of rocks. Tough, serious words from John to be sure.

When I lived near Berkeley, California, in the 1960s there was a local evangelist named Hubert who always reminded me of John the Baptist – not in appearance, but in demeanor. Hubert was always neatly dressed in an old blue suit and a crisp white shirt, a bit frayed at the collar. When he preached on the streets, he always drew a crowd. And he never minced words. He had some viper-like names for the college students who sometimes heckled him. Red-faced, he would wave his Bible in the air and call people to repentance. I don't know if he ever had any converts, but he always had a crowd.

I think there is one more piece that helps make sense of why this passage shows up as it does. In our collect today we prayed, "Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us..." anticipating the coming of Jesus.

The way John is portrayed in today's gospel is as one who certainly helps to 'stir things up' as he preached to those seekers who gathered at the Jordan River. He preached repentance – calling people to turn in a new direction. He told the truth as he saw it. He prepared the way for Jesus.

And as we look through this gospel passage we can see some of the ways he stirred things up for his followers and perhaps for us as well.

One way is with this call to repent – to turn around and head in a new direction. It is important for our lives to bear fruit – an agricultural image that is typical of Luke's gospel.

Trees that are not bearing fruit, he says, are cut down – a truth you can learn from any orchardist in the diocese. Not only cut down, but tossed into the fire. If our lives are not bearing fruit, there is a reason to be concerned. Are you feeling the joy yet?

Clearly John is stirring up in his hearers and in us the need to look at our lives. To look within and then to look around us and weigh our integrity and faithfulness.

Not surprisingly, people ask him what they should do. And his answer comes quickly and directly. The advice is basic. Not rocket science. Share what you have with the poor. Tax collectors should not gouge people. Soldiers shouldn't bully people or rip them off. This is a basic teaching on practical justice. The kind of fairness, generosity and sacrifice that is a path to a holy life.

In a way this is a spirituality of every-day life. Down to earth, ethical behavior for every-day people. Soldiers, tax collectors, folks in the next village down the road. And there is some joy hidden in there. One commentator says joy emerges in its simplicity. Fidelity to God does have to be heroic. Just faithful and sensible.

We could be those people on the riverbank, bringing the stuff of our lives – our longings, our joys, our struggles, our sorrows to this encounter with John, this the shaggy, prophetic Baptizer. Perhaps we would be wondering if and when the Messiah would appear. Or wondering if John, himself was the Messiah.

We do know that this crowd was filled with expectation. One translation says they were "on the tiptoe of expectation" that he might indeed be the Messiah. Another translation says the "interest of the people was building. They were all beginning to wonder..." Certainly John had stirred up some speculation about whether he, himself, was the one to come.

But he puts that to rest quickly. “I baptize you with water, but the one who is more powerful than I is coming. I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals.” That one to come is Jesus, who Eugene Peterson in *The Message* says is going to ‘ignite the kingdom life, light a fire, the holy spirit within you, changing you from the inside out.. He will place everything true in its proper place before God. He will put everything false out with the trash.”

That’s how Jesus will stir things up.

Maybe that sounds a bit out of our comfort zone. But we are dealing with the divine here. Jesus comes into this world as a vulnerable infant, but has a bold and transformative mission among us. A vulnerability that is very human, but also a call to stir things up for God in a way that leads us into wholeness, into newness.

There is a kind of Advent rejoicing in all of that. Anticipation. Mystery. The one who comes to shake things up. The one who is to come who loves and cares for the vulnerable. The one who is to come who embraces us and all humanity. The one who embodies compassion. The one who brings us hope. The one who loves life into us.

We wait and watch for Emmanuel – for God with us. And we rejoice.